

The Highway Industry: Unintended Consequences

Much of what is written here came directly from the Strong Towns website www.strongtowns.org. Strong Towns is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit media advocacy organization that produces content that analyzes the failures of the post-war North American development pattern while giving citizens the knowledge and tools to start making our places better today.

Our September 2024 Go North Alliance Newsletter discussed how Tucker County—especially Davis, Thomas, and Canaan Valley—has achieved a thriving economy based on nature-based tourism and economic growth. Our natural beauty, abundant recreation opportunities, and small-town charm and amenities have resulted in a flourishing local economy.

So, what's the problem?

What does “economic development” really mean to us?

Per the West Virginia Department of Highways (WVDOH), one of the purposes of the Corridor H project is to “Promote economic development in the region.” (1996 FEIS; 2007 SEIS). But what does that really mean? WVDOH sees economic development and opportunity as what grows up around each exit and interchange when construction is completed.

Economic development success to some looks like “big box:” Walmart. Home Depot. Target. Sheetz. Taco Bell. Comfort Suites. Holiday Inn. Multiple car dealerships, a number of banks and a “collection of dreams, big and small, tied to the success of these national and regional chains.”

Thomas and Davis have become destinations in their own right, supported by a sustainable grassroots economy based on our natural environment and small-town feel. But rural tourist destinations such as ours face distinct challenges—specifically, an acute lack of buildable land since our towns are surrounded by public land, a limited local labor supply, and a housing shortage. An example is Colorado’s iconic ski town of Telluride, where many of the construction workers who build houses live in Montrose, a three-hour daily commute. (Article: Western Resort Towns Risk Being “Loved to death.” Nick Bowlin. 2023)

We already have a problem finding workers for our local thriving businesses. Who will keep the chain stores and gas stations on the highway alive? If workers are brought in from the outside, where will they live?

At first, you might see highway-oriented development as the area’s salvation, but the highway industry can suck wealth out of the community, limiting jobs and opportunities in the process. Highway projects often shift travelers away from small towns—and away from the very resources that support our unique economy. We’ve all seen communities decline, followed by high long-term vacancy rates and rapidly falling property values.

“And while the former owner of the now-failed local grocery store can become the night manager at Walmart (true story), the former owner of the now-failed downtown shoe store can sell shoes at Kohls and the former owner of the now-failed downtown pizza place can run the lunch crew at Applebees, only a handful of people are really benefiting from this arrangement.” <https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2015/1/18/the-classic-case>

We've come to associate transportation improvements with success. In that, we have mistaken the *shiny-and-new* for the *resilient-and-timeless*. Is that what we want for our mountaintop?